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Pastoral Letter for Lent, 2021

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We enter the season of Lent with hope and determination: hope that God’s grace may touch us and determination to engage seriously in the work of moral and spiritual renewal. We do this so that we may live our Christian faith with greater integrity and celebrate the Lord Jesus’ death and resurrection with true joy. I believe that the rivers of grace, which never run dry, flow even more abundantly in this holy season. We should all bathe in that grace, for by it we may be cleansed of sin and refreshed in mind and spirit.

The terms used for Lent in different languages emphasize various aspects of this penitential season. *Quadragesima* in Latin points to the forty days Jesus fasted and battled against temptations in the desert; the Italian *Quaresima*, the Spanish *Cuaresma* and the French *Carême* follow the Latin. The Germans call it *Fastenzeit* or “Fasting Time,” underlining the penitential aspect of the season. (In Malta the Catholics call Lent “Random,” from the Moslem practice of fasting.) The English *Lent* refers to the gradual lengthening of daylight in the northern hemisphere as we embrace spring and leave winter behind. For most of us, overcoming sin and learning to love better are a gradual process, not accomplished overnight, so our English term suggests that.

St. Leo the Great wrote: “What the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion, so that the Lenten fast enjoined by the Apostles may be fulfilled not simply by abstinence from food but above all by the renunciation of sin.” The great challenge in Lent is to address sin in our lives. On a personal level, I recommend a focused approach. As a laser beam is effective by concentrating its power narrowly, a focus on what I call an embedded sin can lead to its weakening or elimination.

An embedded sin is one that we just can’t seem to get rid of or perhaps don’t really want to renounce. It may be a constant habit of criticizing others, a refusal to reconcile with someone, a prejudice against people of another race, religion or national origin, a tendency to lie to get our way, a sin of impurity or other form of self-indulgence. We first must desire to be rid of it. We need an honest talk with ourselves: do we want to do God’s will or not? Then we must admit that we have not been able by our own efforts to overcome that sin – in fact, as St. Paul would say, we are enslaved by it. We must implore God’s help each day in our prayers.

The Sacrament of Penance has great value in this effort, for it not only forgives sin but, if received sincerely, it keeps us from hardening in sin. Some embedded sins, like wounds that require frequent applications of a salve and new bandages, need frequent confession, each confession and absolution weakening the hold of that sin on us. We may also benefit in confession or apart from it from the advice a priest may give us. Some priests (and others) have much experience and wisdom to offer a person who genuinely wants to overcome an embedded sin.

The traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving serve us well in overcoming personal sin. Prayer to an unbeliever seems to be a waste of time, but to us who believe in the living God, it is a daily lifeline that connects us with the One who created, redeemed and loves us. As a monk once said, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.” Traditional prayers are valuable for their simplicity and depth. God will listen to our own words as well and, in some fashion – by an inspiration He gives us, by a Scripture passage we hear or read, by a remark made by a friend, by something that happens – God will respond to us. The important thing is to give Him the opportunity and that is what prayer does.

Fasting, whether from food or from a form of entertainment or from buying something we really don’t need, is like a silent prayer that cries out to God, saying we recognize our need for Him above all else. We hunger more for His Word than for bread. Almsgiving helps, too, for Scripture says: *As water quenches a flaming fire, so alms atone for sins* [Sirach 3:29]. Any kind of good work is a form of almsgiving: patiently listening to a distressed person, shoveling the snow off the steps and sidewalk of an elderly couple, calling up a friend who is sick to encourage her. Good works take us out of ourselves and strike a blow at the self-centeredness that is at the heart of all sin.

There is also a social dimension to sin that is found at more than one level. At a very personal level, I may indulge in bigotry against a group because of its race, religion, political affiliation or other identifying mark. Even if I never say or do anything overtly that could be called bigoted, my interior disdain for the group makes me unwilling to protest injustices toward its members or to do them any good. If the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable, giving into Samaritan bigotry toward Jews (which they reciprocated) had passed by the Jew beaten by the robbers, his interior bigotry would have led to a sin of omission. He overcame bigotry and helped the wounded man. Conversion starts within. If we want to be fair and charitable to all, as our faith teaches us to be, then we must confront negative attitudes we may have toward others.

At another level, the social dimension of sin is evident in the corrupting of public morals. Many are calling today for peace and an end to divisions in our country but social peace is not possible as long as our people cannot agree on the most basic moral values. Sinful behavior in private is bad enough, but laws and publicly approved and applauded behavior that are morally wrong are worse, because they corrupt the impressionable, especially the young.

Aborting unborn babies is barbaric, the strong overpowering the weak, even when the mother’s situation is very difficult. Gay persons deserve respect and fair treatment, but sexual relations between members of the same sex cannot fulfill the fundamental purpose of our

sexuality – to produce offspring – and are therefore inappropriate, as are heterosexuals’ intimate relations if they deliberately frustrate their procreative dimension. Harsh rhetoric and cruel actions directed at immigrants demean their humanity and reveal a national selfishness that conveniently forgets how much immigrants have contributed to this country. Allowing large corporations to trample on the poor in rural parts of our country, like Appalachia, making their profit while giving little or nothing back to those areas, is unjust and immoral.

We Catholics are equipped to challenge these and other manifestations of social corruption. As St. Paul said in another context: *there have to be factions among you in order that those who are approved among you may become known* [I Corinthians 11:19].

Our strength is in our Catholic anthropology, which starts from the principle that every human being is endowed by God with a genuine human nature that is both personal and social. That principle leads us to favor treating fairly members of different races, religions, sexual orientations and national origins. It leads us to promote the good of marriage and the family and to defend parents’ right to educate their children as they judge best. It leads us to oppose ideologies and acts which harm human beings and their communities: abortion, racist activities and discriminatory practices held over from the past, domestic violence and the death penalty, among others. The same principle keeps us from embracing harmful departures from a correct view of human nature, such as measuring human beings essentially in economic terms or thinking that we can choose our sex in defiance of our body or insisting that equality of opportunity must, regardless of effort and circumstances, always result in equality of outcomes. If we can hold to the basic principle of a God-given human nature that unfolds in community, we have a way to thread our way through the clashing viewpoints on these issues and to promote a sane understanding that leads to true human flourishing.

So, what can we do about social sins? Again, the traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving come to our aid. Do you believe in the efficacy of prayer? Read Luke 18:1-8, where a persistent widow obtains her rights from an unjust judge. Jesus comments: *Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily.* Make it a habit this Lent to pray that our people may awaken to the signs of moral decay in our society. Fasting for this purpose is also effective, a prayer of the body telling God we mean what we say in our vocal prayer. St. Leo the Great said, “What we save by fasting we give to feed the poor,” so fasting leads to actions that help others.

Which brings me to almsgiving. How can that help in dealing with social sin? First, we can support groups that serve those ignored by the elites that control our society. We have a number of pregnancy centers in the state that help families to have and take care of their children. They need volunteers and money! Catholic Charities West Virginia has stepped up heroically during this pandemic to help those left aside by our economy. CCWV needs volunteers, too, especially as many have had to stay home because of age or illness.

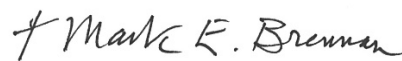
A second form of almsgiving is advocacy. We can take individual action by contacting those who represent us in local, state and federal government. The more of us who contact them about

issues that are affecting the moral welfare of our country, the more they will take notice. We can also join with others who advocate for social justice issues. West Virginians for Life advocates for the unborn and their parents, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia addresses issues of poverty and cultural and environmental degradation in our region, Catholic Education Partners advocates for fair treatment by government of our young people in Catholic schools. Other groups are also working to put our nation on a better course. Common efforts often bear more fruit than individual ones, so consider supporting or joining such a group. In various ways we can make a difference in overcoming the corrupting of public morals in our land.

Finally, nourish your faith by religious practices typical of Lent: daily Mass, the Stations of the Cross, the Rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours (prayed with others, if possible), Bible study and especially the beautiful liturgies of Holy Week. Consult your parish or go online for other resources. Keep in mind that some West Virginians, never baptized or baptized in other Christian churches or baptized Catholic but never raised in the faith, are completing their preparations for the sacraments of Christian initiation in Lent. In the early Church, the baptized would join the elect (that is, the catechumens “elected” for full initiation at Easter) in their fasting and prayers as a sign of solidarity with them. What you do this Lent is not for you alone. Pray for the elect and the candidates for full communion with our Catholic Church in support of their holy intentions.

As I close this letter, I remind you that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead to make us a new creation. St. Paul wrote: *From now on we regard no one according to the flesh . . . So, whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold new things have come* [II Corinthians 5:16-17]. Lent is a privileged time to slough off our corrupt old self and put on Christ, the truly new man in history. For some, this will be their last Lent. Others will have more, but why wait to do what’s right? Forty days of fasting, prayer and good works, striving to eradicate embedded sins and counteract social sins, will make this a good Lent for us. As St. Junipero Serra, the Franciscan Apostle of California said, “¡Siempre para adelante, nunca atrás!” (Always go forward, never go back!). May that be our spirit this Lent.

Faithfully yours in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan
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